

Testifier Name: Lexi Boccuzzi, Student at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and graduate of Stamford Public Schools

Agenda Item 8, S.B. No. 247 (RAISED) AN ACT REQUIRING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO ESTABLISH A POLICY REGARDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ON CAMPUS.

Testimony:

Hi, my name is Lexi Boccuzzi and I am a student at the University of Pennsylvania where I am an undergraduate representative on the University Committee for Open Expression. In my time enrolled in Stamford Public Schools, I was taught to value diversity of thought and discourse in my academic and social lives. Upon arriving at Penn I expected to see a similar appreciation for the importance of free expression among my peers, professors and the administration on campus. The reality I was faced with instead was an environment filled with self-censorship among students, ideological similarity among professors, and a lack of effort on the part of the administration to protect and foster free speech. I have heard very similar realities from friends of mine who went on to attend college in Connecticut like Yale and UConn. This lead me to run for a position on the University Committee for Open Expression where we offer measures such as open expression monitors for events that might be controversial to ensure that audience members can voice their opinions and speakers are not censored by the administration or student body.

In a recent op-ed that I wrote as a columnist and editor for Penn's student newspaper The Daily Pennsylvanian entitled, "Diversity of thought is dying in academia", I discussed the consequences of nonexistent or failing free expression policies on campus. In the piece I cite a research study done by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a non-for-profit which advocates for free speech on campus. Their polling in 2021 showed that 80% of undergraduate university students claim that they self-censor in their courses, not expressing their opinions for fear of social or academic repercussions. In light of the circumstances surrounding the student disciplined at Yale Law school and the UChicago geophysicist professor prohibited from speaking at MIT due to his beliefs on affirmative action last fall as well as numerous instances of administrators pushed out on the basis of conflicting opinions, it's clear that free expression policies are necessary to protect everyone in academic life.

This issue however is not only alarming for its consequences on the lives of people working and studying on college campuses but also for society at large. I am regularly shocked by the lack of open-mindedness by my peers at Penn. The institutions educating America's youth are failing to prioritize protecting free speech and by extension are graduating young people who have been the product of echo chambers. The future of our country needs to be able to engage with beliefs in opposition of their own, problem solve and understand others' perspectives. This bill will help to ensure that Connecticut's universities do just that.